

Pilot Project Profile: Whitingham Schools

Over the past two years, Whitingham Schools has developed a student guided pilot, which they called 'DOT.COM' (Drop Out and Truancy Committee) - with active support from Whitingham Wings - the school's 21st Century Learning Community Project, the Deerfield Community Partnership, and the school administration. Initially, a school-wide forum was held for students dropping out and to school success. During the same period of time, groups were also held with the school board, parents association, faculty, and staff. Out of these meetings, the following priorities were identified:

- Community building for the whole school
- Students identified trust and adult commitment to the process as the first issue to be addressed.
- Youth and parents are partners and resources to the school
- Policies, procedures and policies review
- Leadership and leadership training

The students specifically identified concerns about the school lunch program. They believed this concern could be remedied within a short period of time, and in so doing would indicate the commitment of the administration. Everyone learned about effective advocacy for change, and also saw dramatic changes occur in the food service. This gave DOT.COM visibility in the school, empowered the students to consider how to have voice in other school decisions, and establish the role of student partners in the school's system.

In the past year, students have been given a seat on the school board, been involved in discussions about the school discipline policies, and been instrumental in the selection of the new principal. Students have made presentations to faculty, at statewide meetings, and at the New England Middle School Educators conference in Rhode Island. They have become familiar with the High Schools on the Move 12 Principles and the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation Student Bill of Rights.

In the next year, DOT.COM is developing an outreach program to address truancy issues in the elementary grades. This program is based on the Quantum Leap program (Bennington). DOT.COM will be integrating community service into many aspects of school life, including a reparative justice approach to discipline.

A recent decision by the voters of the Wilmington and Whitingham communities will combine the high schools and middle schools in fall 2004. This ambitious plan is an opportunity to bring together the best of the two schools to provide broader options for students and with anticipated financial savings. DOT.COM has joined with several other school and community initiatives that also have goals community service, student engagement and leadership, and improved academic outcomes: The Foundation for Excellent Schools Team in Wilmington High School; The Transition Team for the new combined schools that is focusing on student support services and has invited broad student representation from both schools in middle school and high school advisory groups; Whitingham Wings; the Deerfield Community Partnership; and The Alliance for Building Communities. This collaborative will sustain and strengthen the activities of each of the projects, furthering their shared goals.